

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Beethoven's Symphony No. 4

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MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)**PIANO CONCERTO IN G MAJOR****Duration: ca. 23 minutes**

Maurice Ravel is one of the more intriguing figures in the classical music brochure. Standing just over 5 feet tall, impeccably dressed and groomed, fascinated by watches and precision machines and protective of his personal life, Ravel has been both a delight and a frustration for biographers. Most agree, however, that he was a brilliant and imaginative musician who wrote works of consummate beauty on every scale except the symphony.

The coloristic wash of *Daphnis et Chloe*, the ethereal *Pavane for a Dead Princess* and the gracious *String Quartet* are sublime, subtle masterstrokes, and his hypnotic *Bolero* remains one of the most-performed pieces in the repertoire. He also wrote two concertos for piano, the one you will hear shortly, and another for the left hand only (composed for the Viennese pianist, Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I).

The *Piano Concerto in G*, completed in 1931, was “written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saens,” Ravel once said. But from the first moments on, listeners hear someone else: George Gershwin.

A bit of background. During a tour of the United States in 1928, Ravel attended a performance of the musical *Funny Face* and expressed an interest in meeting its composer – the rising star of American musical theater. In an encounter that is now legendary, Gershwin asked Ravel if he could study with him. Ravel modestly told the younger man there was nothing he could teach him that he didn't already know, and that his natural gifts were far better than any lesson in composition. Ravel instead wrote a letter to the famed pedagogue Nadia Boulanger, asking if she would “have the courage, which I wouldn't dare, to undertake the awesome responsibility” of teaching this talented young man.

Gershwin obviously made an impression on Ravel, and the jazziness he molded into the *G Major Concerto* pays homage to him through a tip of the hat to *Rhapsody in Blue*. Some might even think that the concerto and *An American in Paris* were written by the same person.

The opening movement is a romp, lighthearted and carefree, and releases the shackles of its classical mold for an air of American jazz. Ravel's deference to Gershwin isn't literal, as the music critic Ethan Mordden once noted: “That Ravel is a subtler artist in this style does not in the least take away from *Rhapsody in Blue* and other Gershwin compositions; if anything, Ravel's prudently articulated ‘jazz’ makes Gershwin's more athletic autograph all the more potent.”

The middle section is a seductive adagio that sends listeners into a dream world, suddenly broken by a closing presto of breakneck speed and full of the accents of exotic percussion instruments.

Natasha Paremski, pianist in this weekend's performances, calls the Ravel a "true orchestra showcase" and a "supremely colorful work." She describes her four-minute solo in the slow movement as "an incredibly poignant musical moment and a favorite of mine."

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
SYMPHONY NO. 4 in B FLAT MAJOR, Op. 60
Duration: ca. 34 minutes

Although Covid-19 interrupted so many of the plans orchestras made in 2020 to celebrate Beethoven's 250th birthday, TFO continues on its quest this weekend with the convivial *Symphony No. 4*. This work, along with the other even-numbered symphonies, have long taken a back seat to the heroic *Third*, the mighty *Fifth*, the festive *Seventh* and the most imposing of all, the *Ninth*.

But let's not sell them short. Igor Stravinsky once said he would take even-over-odd Beethoven any day, and they are as integral to the composer's canon as comedies are to dramas in Shakespeare. Robert Schumann called the *Fourth* "the Greek-like slender one" among the symphonies. More importantly, each of the nine are a chapter in Beethoven's evolution as a symphonist. To hear each independent of the others is, in many ways, to know the composer himself.

Of course, the Fourth Symphony is not an extension of the *Third* any more than a prelude to the *Fifth*. It stands alone, notably for its lyricism, although there's no denying its place between two giants. "He was aiming to broaden his new symphonic framework still further by showing that the epic, heroic model was only one of a number of alternatives," notes Lewis Lockwood in his book *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*. "The **Fourth** shows that less could be as much, perhaps more."

It was composed during a time of tremendous productivity that included the *Razumovsky Quartets*, the *Appassionata sonata*, the *Violin Concerto* and the *Piano Concerto No. 4*. Its tranquil nature offers no hint of the brutish behavior Beethoven exhibited in the summer of 1806 while composing it as guest in the summer castle of Prince Lichnowsky. He barricaded himself in his room, refusing visitors, bellowing musical ideas like a crazed impresario.

The scoring is essentially that of a Mozart orchestra: one flute; winds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; and strings. The atmosphere is simple and without contrapuntal flourish. For all its apparent lightness, the symphony opens mysteriously and by the *allegro vivace* achieves moments of emotional depth, especially in how Beethoven treats harmony. The *adagio* is a lilting *cantabile* unmatched in anything he wrote up to this time, followed by a *scherzo* that served as a sketch for works to come later in Beethoven's career. The finale introduces a slew of fleeting 16th notes and cascades into a *moto perpetuo* that nearly trips over itself in a race to the end.

Kurt Loft, former music critic for The Tampa Tribune, has been writing about the Tampa Bay arts for more than 40 years.